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SOME QUESTIONS FOR STAMP COLLECTORS

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The wide-ranging and thought-provoking contributions to this volume raise a series of questions regarding archaeological studies of early stamps and, more generally, of ancient artefacts. My aim here is to highlight these questions, using a critical perspective that is intended to draw out some of the key issues raised by the contributors at the same time as encouraging all of us to explore new ways of approaching these expressive but ambiguous objects. My simple but central observation is that the ways in which archaeologists have previously studied early stamps has had significant consequences for our understandings of them, and that we should therefore think carefully and critically about our role as authors and about the data-sets, terminologies, classifications, methods, theories and interpretations that we promote in future studies.

A variety of scholars, representing a range of methodological and theoretical traditions within prehistoric archaeology, have been attracted to the study of stamps, both as art objects and as artefacts; and they have published information about them in the form of written texts and illustrations in academic publications, ranging from monographs to papers in journals and conference volumes. But to what extent are we aware of each others' studies, and to what degree have we been influenced (or rejected) each others' ideas? How have we reached, presented and justified our opinions? More personally, what precisely is it about these objects that attracted us in the first place, and what is it about them that has sustained our interest over the years? And, assuming that all of us have used stamps in practice (as children or cooks or artists, for example), why have we largely denied these personal experiences when it comes to writing about the human uses of stamps? And, anyway, who are our intended audiences, and what impact have our texts had on them (if any)? How, then, do our research and publications compare, say, to studies of prehistoric figurines?

Numerous examples of early stamps made of well-preserved baked clay and stone, as well as some stamp impressions in clay, have now been published individually and as regional corpora and added to museum collections as a consequence of many years of largely chance discoveries. Furthermore, new archaeological fieldwork at previously excavated and new sites is continuing to lead to the recovery of more specimens. In the future, perhaps some made of organic materials may even be found. But how representative is our current sample of data, both quantitatively and in terms of the materials from which the stamps and their impressions were made, for different places and periods? And to what degree of detail and accuracy have these known examples and their archaeological deposition contexts been published? How accessible are those publications to scholars working across national boundaries? Why have experimental studies of their potential uses only been published anecdotally? What aspects of stamps are emphasised (or hidden) in published archaeological drawings and photographs? And, to what extents do our publications and museum displays of these objects misrepresent their original values and vitality?

This relatively distinctive category of artefact, whose small-scale form is usually characterised by a handle and an engraved face, is known by a variety of names, including ‘stamp’, ‘stamp-seal’, and ‘pintadera’. But what are the origins of these terms, with what scholarly and regional traditions are they associated, and should we still use all or any of them today? Furthermore, within this broad category, significant variability – particularly in terms of style, material and size – as well as some striking similarities, are also evident over time and space. But, according to what criteria should we compare and contrast, group and divide-up, these objects? How much attention should we pay to exceptional types? And what hope do we have of identifying the classificatory schemes of their original makers and users, and of transformations of these over generations and in different places?

In practice stamps are studied in a similar way to other categories of decorated artefact, ceramic vessels in particular, with an emphasis on their materials and techniques of production, their forms, decorative motifs, uses, and so on. But to what extent have regional traditions of archaeology constrained these studies over the last century? Would future studies benefit from comparing stamps more closely with other categories of contextually associated artefact? Would they also benefit from more specialist analyses, using techniques derived from archaeological science or experimental archaeology to identify the traces of pigments left on them or the precise sequences of production, use, circulation, breakage and deposition involved in their life-histories? And should our analyses be more (or less) empirical?

These engraved objects, and the marks that they are capable of leaving on the surfaces of other materials, are certainly visually expressive and stimulating, to the extent that they almost demand interpretation on some level. However, they were also tactile tools that were modelled and used by hand in a relatively simple manner. So, how should we approach their interpretation, particularly with regard to their decorative motifs? Or should we not attempt to do so at all, since we have little hope of perceiving and understanding stamps according to their original makers’ and users’ ways of seeing and thinking? What, if anything, can relatively recent, historically and ethnographically documented, examples from around the world add to the interpretation of prehistoric examples produced in quite different cultural circumstances? What, too, could an understanding of contemporary body art add to our studies? Should our approach be less scientific and more poetic? Is it better to think of stamps as elements of art or visual culture or as components of material or sensual culture? How were they made, used, disposed of and valued? In what circumstances were novel stamps and motifs accepted or rejected – technologically, socially and culturally? What principles of design underlie their engraved patterns, and how meaningful could these have been? How do these designs compare to other dynamic forms of artistic expression, such as dance or music? What would contemporary artists or perceptual psychologists make of these designs? How was the production and use of these objects attached to the biologically and socially differentiated bodies of communicative persons, both living and dead, particularly during ritually-marked events in their life histories?

To conclude, then, I hope that you, the reader, will enjoy this book, and that it will not only enhance your knowledge of early seals but also raise new questions in your mind, which will stimulate you to undertake fresh studies of these enigmatic but charming objects that silently implore to us to pick them up, again and again.